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# Cyber-School: The Challenges of Teaching and Learning Online From One English Instructor's Perspective



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In a few weeks, an eight-week, online freshman composition course will begin, and I will be teaching it. One of the first assignments my students will complete is a forum post and response discussing their thoughts on traditional versus online classes. I have assigned this forum topic every class for the past five semesters, and the responses are almost always the same. Students consistently say that while traditional face-to-face class formats are “easier” and offer a “better” experience, online classes are more convenient and are often the only way students with full-time jobs, families, or military deployments can pursue a college education.

As an instructor who has taught using a variety of formats ranging from traditional face-to-face to hybrid to fully online, I have to agree with my students. Teaching online has made it possible for me to finish graduate school, homeschool my children, and relocate out of state—all while continuing to teach college level composition and literature; I am grateful for it. But I have to admit that the teaching experience is richer and more enjoyable for me when I am in a room with warm bodies, when I can see their faces, and read their body language. Teaching online, in the absence of any visual contact, and often without any real-time communication, has underscored for me, how important that immediate feedback is. If I can see my students, I can know right away if they are getting the concept of a three-point blueprint, if their attention is drifting, or if they’re laughing at my jokes.

Of course the challenges for the online teacher go beyond getting used to interacting with text on the screen instead of faces in a classroom (which, for most of the instructors I know, is one of the biggest reasons they became teachers in the first place). The most immediate difference in terms of actual instruction is that everything the instructor needs to convey to students—from basic class procedures, to how to fix a comma splice—must be either typed or voice recorded. Until I transferred my first class from face-to-face to online, I never realized just how much of my teaching was done by *talking*. Granted, I talk more than the average human, even if you figure teachers (who seem to talk more than ordinary people) into the mix. I had relied heavily on the good-old whiteboard, fast-talking, and lots of emphatic gesturing to instruct my students

in the basic elements of composition, and the subtle turns of rhetoric. Teaching online meant I had to somehow accomplish these feats with my hands tied, so to speak, and I found that to be an enormous challenge.

The online student also faces challenges of his or her own. Many of my students, especially those who have not taken an online class before, struggle with self-discipline and time management. Many are newly graduated from a traditional high school setting and are accustomed to lobbying for extensions on late assignments, seeking help at a tutoring center or from a teacher before or after school. Many have had parents, coaches, teachers, and counselors reminding them to keep up with assignments. While it's true that most new college students have to shift from a passive, dependent learning approach to a more pro-active, independent one, based on my observations, this shift is particularly difficult for online students. Since there is no set meeting time, who will know if he doesn't log on to do his coursework for the day? The worst he can expect is an e-mail message or a poor grade, arguably less motivating than a real-life instructor with a grade book in her hand. And when a student has trouble with a concept or assignment, she not only has to take the initiative to seek help and clarification, but she must also articulate what it is she doesn't understand in a written message. In order to do that, she has to know what it is she doesn't understand. That is every bit as difficult as it sounds, especially for a student just learning how to communicate effectively in writing.

After the first few weeks of my first online course, it was unanimous among all parties involved that there were features of traditional face-to-face classes that made learning easier, more efficient, and more enjoyable---features we missed. The first round of essays submitted in that first class made clear that there was a breakdown in the transfer of knowledge somewhere. The question was how could I, as a new online instructor, recreate some of those features in an online format? In addition to beefing up my digital lectures and course documents, I sought the help of the director of the online campus for my community college. Together we set up an online meeting site where my students could log in live and participate in a "web workshop" with me once a week. Since real-time "cyber class" is not part of the paradigm for online classes for our community college, my students were distressed at first by this new requirement, and every semester there are still a few who balk at the idea. The whole point of taking online classes, they argue, is not having to attend class at a set time, whether that means driving to a brick-and-mortar building, or logging on.

The compromise I came up with was that the web workshop would be recorded, and students who could not participate live would be required to view the recording and submit a summary/response. This web workshop element has proven to be a crucial key for me and my students to replicating some of the best things about a traditional class: live interaction, immediate redirection and/or re-teaching of concepts when necessary, and those all-important jokes, though

now I have to judge by the tone of their chats whether or not they think I'm funny. I still miss hearing a chuckle ripple through the room, but I've learned to be satisfied with LOL.

There's no denying we live in a digital age, an age where we're willing to do everything online: from banking to dating. There's even a story of a deployed soldier who was by his wife's side as she gave birth, encouraging and weeping and loving her through a live streaming video feed. Surely, we are only just beginning to discover the possibilities of online living and online learning, but as we make our way to those discoveries, it is necessary to reflect and ask questions, to do our best to maintain high standards of teaching and learning. My hope is that this article and many more like it from instructors, administrators, students, and others will contribute to that conversation.